



11 June 2021

A MESSAGE FROM LCA BISHOP JOHN HENDERSON

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ

I am writing to you at the earliest possible opportunity to inform you of changes to the format in which the 20th Convention of General Synod will be conducted.

Convention of General Synod will be conducted partly online

Yesterday morning (10/06/21) the General Church Board resolved to conduct the Convention of General Synod partly online. After making every effort to hold the Convention by the usual means, ongoing uncertainty about travel restrictions, exacerbated by the recent lockdown in Victoria and its potential flow-on impact in parts of Queensland and New South Wales, meant the time had come to make the very difficult call on a COVID contingency plan.

Taking into account the extraordinary circumstances relating to COVID-19, the GCB unanimously agreed to hold the 20th regular Convention of General Synod in two parts:

1. an online meeting in early October 2021, which will then be adjourned until
2. the meeting resumes in-person at a location to be determined in September or October 2022.

The GCB has adopted this approach, a first for the LCANZ, so we can keep the regular constitutional cycle of three-year synodical terms and make the necessary decisions in a timely and orderly way, allowing proper opportunity for consideration and discussion. With the risks to travel at present, that will mean an online format in 2021 and an in-person meeting in 2022, God willing.

The **2021 online** component of the Convention, likely to be held over two days, will be for essential business items necessary for the regular transition into the next synodical term, such as

- the election of the LCANZ bishop, assistant bishop and General Church Board;
- board and council reporting; and
- voting on essential constitutional and other matters that for various reasons cannot be held over until 2022.

Delegates will receive the Book of Reports, which also contains proposals to General Synod, prior to the 2021 meeting, in the usual way.

The **2022 in-person** component of the meeting, likely to be held over two to three days, will be for matters of a theological or doctrinal nature and the proposals that will require robust 'live' debate in the usual Synod format.

The planning team will do its best to make sure all delegates can participate in both the online and in-person components of the Convention.

General Pastors Conference

The General Pastors Conference, scheduled for 6-8 July 2021, will be impacted by the change of format for Convention of General Synod. The Constitution requires General Pastors Conference to meet 'in conjunction with a regular Convention of General Synod' in order to provide advice to Synod on theological and doctrinal matters referred to it by GCB.

GPC will now not be held in-person in July 2021. The GPC planning committee will make alternative plans and will advise all pastors of the revised arrangements as soon as practicable. The first communication to pastors from the GPC planning committee will be issued later today.

It is important to note that GPC will still need to ensure that nominations for the LCANZ bishop and assistant bishop reach the opening session of Convention of General Synod in 2021 and that its advice on theological and doctrinal issues reaches delegates suitably in advance of the second meeting of Convention in 2022.

We recognise that these changes to GPC will inconvenience some pastors, but we also know that many others will be relieved that this decision has been made.

Rationale for the changes

Across the church, widespread COVID-related uncertainty and anxiety is evident in the sluggish registration rate for both GPC and the Convention of General Synod. Pastors and delegates seem nervous about committing to events that might see them in lockdown for days or weeks, or in enforced quarantine. The recent Victorian lockdown and threatened breakouts elsewhere through the activities of errant travellers have no doubt heightened people's reluctance to commit.

In relation to GPC, we are concerned that a lower-than-average number of pastors discussing and providing advice to General Synod on issues of considerable consequence for the church is far from ideal. We want to ensure that all pastors have an opportunity to contribute to the conversations at GPC, and that can only happen if they feel safe to travel.

In the same way, we want all parishes to have the opportunity for their duly elected delegate or properly appointed alternate to represent them at General Synod. With the barrier of travel anxiety removed, this is far more likely to be realised.

In relation to General Synod, the GCB was mindful of the financial risk to the LCANZ and its parishes in the event of a snap COVID lockdown in Melbourne, which could see church leaders and delegates quarantined in hotels for days, weeks or longer.

We are also mindful of the considerable burden a physical Convention of General Synod in Melbourne would place on our already exhausted leaders, pastors and people in Victoria, the state that has borne the brunt of the COVID pandemic in Australia.

In making this weighty decision, the GCB has considered not only the potential impact of delegates and others but also the risk to the wider church. While the financial risk is one factor, there is also the possibility that any decisions made by a depleted Convention of General Synod might later be contested as not being fully legitimate. Some people might feel disenfranchised if General Synod goes ahead without its full contingent of enthusiastic and well-prepared delegates.

Spiritually, whatever our best laid plans for the GPC and Convention of General Synod, at this time and always our trust and hope is in God, and his only Son Jesus, our Lord and Saviour.

Reactions and Implications

Each of us will have our own reaction to this news. Some of us will breathe a huge sigh of relief. Others will be disappointed that we need to wait yet another year to see some proposals come before Synod. Or some of us might feel that we are overstating the COVID risk and that we should just push on with it. All these reactions, and others, are quite understandable.

Nevertheless, we need clarity, and we believe this decision will make the best of our changed circumstances while keeping faith with the intent of holding a meeting of delegates from across the church. At the regular meeting of LCANZ department and agency heads yesterday, the initial shock after the announcement about Synod quickly turned to creative thinking for turning this new situation into a positive one. We hope that pastors and lay members, particularly delegates, and others affected by this change can also catch the vision of how we can use this God-given 'pause' to allow us to become better prepared to tackle the challenging proposals that will come to the 2022 in-person component of the regular Convention of General Synod. Indeed, we pray that in 2022 we will look back at this enforced additional preparation time with thanks to God.

As mentioned above, pastors will be contacted later today via email from the GPC planning committee. General Synod delegates will be contacted via email and physical mail.

We expect that you will have questions, particularly in relation to the online component in October this year. As the decision to make the change was made only yesterday, no details are ready to be released just yet. As those details do become available, we will keep registered delegates informed via the Synod eNews, and there will be regular updates in LCA eNews for the wider church.

As we move forwards into uncharted territory, please pray for the members of the General Synod planning committee and the GPC planning committee as they face a brand-new set of challenges, and as they strive to minimise any negative impacts of this change of format and to maximise the opportunities to be creative and innovative.

Contact

Bearing in mind that specific details for the new format for Convention of General Synod are not available yet, if you have questions or concerns, please contact the General Synod planning team via synod@lca.org.au

Let's pray

Heavenly Father, thank you for calling us to be your people. We praise you for your innumerable blessings to us, most of all for revealing yourself to us in Jesus our Saviour. We pray for joy in our hearts as we remember all that you have done for us. We pray for your comfort in our troubles, and your consolation in our grief. We place all our cares and worries before you, and lay them down, trusting you with our lives and all that we are and have. Please help us not to worry about our church or our future. They also are in your hands. Please bless the arrangements for our regular Convention of General Synod, and the General Pastors Conference. Unite us in your grace, love and compassion. We pray in Jesus' name.

*Pastor John Henderson
Bishop, Lutheran Church of Australia and New Zealand
on behalf of the General Church Board*